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Spy vs. Spies

President Nixon has chosen a worthy champion to dispatch on the task of coordinating the g a n g l i n g U.S. intelligence agencies. Mr. Nixon tapped Richard Helms, the head of the Central Intelligence agency. The purpose is laudable but, for the record, every recent president has tried it and has failed.



The spook agencies relentlessly compete with, and often undercut, one another.

Helms

In addition to the CIA, there are the Defense Intelligence agency and the National Security agency. The State department has a research bureau that is close cousin to a spy shop. The FBI is supposed to be confined to domestic counter-intelligence, but it poaches. The Atomic Energy commission has operated a specialized intelligence bureau.

The result sometimes has been a cacophony of findings and reports that overwhelms analysts and which backlog into irrelevancy. Further, Americans end up spending unspecified multimillions more than necessary for their cloaks and daggers.

Mr. Helms apparently has managed to put his own CIA in order, itself a major accomplishment. Perhaps taking cues from its director, the CIA has been cool, accurate and inconspicuous lately. It seems to have overcome the bad case of butterfingers it suffered before Mr. Helms took over.

There's little doubt that the President has defined the problem accurately and has picked the right problem-solver. The question remaining is whether the various agencies will let the problem be solved.